

Black Swan

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Black Swan

by [Petronia](#)

Summary

“Don’t say Hannibal,” said Beverly.

“I’m saying Hannibal,” Will said. Beverly slumped back in the passenger seat, throwing up her hands.

“Swans defend territory, Will! They don’t travel! We’re not talking Garrett Jacob Hobbs killing girls in five states, here!”

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

“Don’t say Hannibal,” said Beverly.

“I’m saying Hannibal,” Will said. Beverly slumped back in the passenger seat, throwing up her hands.

“Swans *defend* territory, Will! They don’t travel! We’re not talking Garrett Jacob Hobbs killing girls in five states, here!”

“That’s creepy,” Zeller said, raising his voice to be heard from the back of the van. “That is a creepy comparison.”

“Breeding pairs don’t travel,” said Will. “The victims have been unmated males. The Du Maurier property backs onto the far end of Muskrat Farm; the Verger swans have probably been crossing the fence for years before this.”

“Then we would have found them in the Du Maurier pond,” said Beverly. “You saw that last one -- Carlos? He wasn’t flying anywhere. That attack happened on Verger grounds.”

“Conveniently out of sight of a dozen motion sensor cameras,” said Price. “Though it’s nice that the rest of the Verger birds alibied out.”

Beverly sighed. “Are we *sure* it’s not a human attacker?”

“We’re sure,” Price and Zeller said together.

“This wasn’t about territory,” Will said. “Or it was, but -- not reactively. They crossed over into his turf, he ejected them, and then he followed them back to theirs. Maybe he took his time about it.”

“That’s not swan behaviour,” Beverly said.

“It’s not mute swan behaviour,” said Will. “We don’t know what Hannibal is.”

Will dropped the others off at the Wild Bird Rescue & Rehabilitation Centre, and drove his own car back to the Du Maurier house.

Bedelia Du Maurier’s Bentley was gone from the driveway, but the last time Will had turned up, she had given him a dry look and a key to the side gate. He unlatched it, crossed Bedelia’s neat, blooming rose garden, and walked down a long, grassy slope to the pond.

No one saw anything wrong with Hannibal. For all his posturing, he had never hurt a human, and no one had seen him attack another bird. As far as Rescue & Rehab were concerned, he was a local fixture. It was rumoured -- Bedelia claiming no knowledge of such a transaction -- that the late Lord Du Maurier had imported Hannibal from a castle in Lithuania, which bred an ornamental population of black swans.

“Although,” Price had said, “he’s a black swan but not a *black swan*, if you know what I mean -- not *C. atratus*. Wrong bill and feet colour, way too big.”

“What is he, then?” Will had said.

Price had shrugged.

Will had seen trumpeter swans, and to him Hannibal looked like a trumpeter; but trumpeters were entirely wild, did not range into Virginia, did not take up residence in the water gardens of the decadently rich, and as far as Google knew, did not come in melanistic morphs. The same was true of hoopoes and other Eurasian species, if you credited the Lithuania yarn.

One fact was certain: there was no other swan like Hannibal in the neighbouring three states. He was unique.

Will stood on the pleasantly sun-dappled bank of the pond, under a willow. He’d worn a dark shirt, and after a moment he spotted Hannibal, making a beeline for him from across the water. The effect was less that of a swimming bird than a small, surface-running submarine.

He was *very* big.

Will glared.

Hannibal came to a stop a few feet away, paddling to stay level with Will’s position. He heaved himself vertical above the water and extended his wings to their full span -- half again as wide as Will was tall. But Will *was* taller, and when he flapped his arms Hannibal reconsidered, and settled.

“You’re full of it,” Will said. Hannibal drew his wings closer to his body and weaved his neck around, watching Will. He had odd, dark red eyes, and if Will was there he always looked at Will.

“He must like you,” Alana had said, early on. “He doesn’t come for just anyone.” Alana was fond of Hannibal, who did come for her, at least when she had bread in hand: weekly volunteer round tables had grown decidedly icy with Will’s insistence that Hannibal was the Chesapeake Swan Ripper.

“You left evidence,” Will muttered, “I know it. I just have to find it.” He bent down to take a water sample. Hannibal watched attentively until he was done, then swam in a tight circle and started to preen.

My victim sees me coming, but it is too late for him. I move quickly, with decisive force, aiming for the vulnerable radius with my beak. The blow will cripple, preventing him from making a full retreat.

He is alone. That was unwise. Now I will repay him in full for his disrespect.

I am larger and stronger, and clear in my aim. He is not prepared for this. Every bite and peck rips into feathers and webbing, gashes flesh. I sense his panic, but his attempts to escape are futile. As he tries to clamber onto the bank, I grip him by the neck and use my full weight to hold his head underwater.

It is not the first time I have done this.

This one was a bully and a brute, lower than pond scum. Others occupy these waters. Now he will serve as a warning to them.

I see my reflection, triumphant above the lifeless body: a black swathe blotting out the sky.

This is my design.

Will startled awake, gasping and sweating. He sat up in bed and put his forehead against his drawn-up knees. Winston lifted his head from the rug where he lay, and whined in inquiry.

“It’s okay,” Will told him. “Just a dream.” The images lingered in a jumble, vividly awful yet increasingly embarrassing. *You’re on medical leave, Will. Don’t let me see you step foot in the classroom until September, Will. Volunteer with an animal charity or something. Get some fresh air.*

Yeah, right. The actual encephalitis had been more relaxing.

The dogs were starting to wake up, a couple getting to their feet and milling around. It was still dark, but not that dark. Will sighed and started to pull on trousers and socks.

When he opened the door Max and Buster took off immediately for the far edge of the field, toward the trout stream. Will listened, assuming a rabbit, but heard no excited barking. He followed at walking pace, puzzled, the rest of the pack pacing him.

By the time they reached the treeline the light was nearly up, a pearly dawn glimmer, softened by the morning fog rolling off the water. Will waded through waist-high grass, dripping with dew, and found the dogs crouched and staring.

There was a naked man in the trout stream.

The stream was not deep. It came up to the man’s waist as he knelt on the stone bed. He was bathing: Will could see the muscles in his back move as he scooped water up with his hands to splash it over his arms and torso. Broad shoulders, tapering waist. A straight fall of hair, more silver than blond. His skin was pale and smooth, not like that of someone who’d been sleeping rough.

Will stared, caught between making deliberate noise to attract attention and withdrawing as silently as could be managed. Buster took the decision out of his hands, sitting up and giving a sharp yip.

The stranger's head jerked around. Will saw a striking face, sharp cheekbones and fine mouth. Eyes of an odd, red-brown colour, wide in surprise.

Where had Will seen those eyes?

"You," Will tried to say, then winced as a sharp gust of wind roiled the fog around them. The sky seemed to darken, shadows sweeping in from the horizon as if time were running in fast reverse: from one second to the next he found he could barely see the other man.

The stranger scrambled to his feet, looking alarmed, and began to retreat toward the opposite bank.

"Wait!" Will said, but the shadows only grew darker, ink-black, and swallowed the man up.

Then they exploded outward, like massive wings.

Will startled awake, gasping and sweating.

"Are you okay?" said Beverly. "No offense, but you look like you've gone a few rounds." She set a steaming paper cup in front of Will, who grasped at it greedily.

"Didn't sleep well," he said.

"Yeah, well, don't land in the hospital again, all right? Jack's already on the warpath."

Will closed his eyes. "Do I need to know?"

"Unfortunately. Sounds like the Verger Foundation is making their yearly support contingent on us catching whatever mauled their birds."

"What?" said Will. "That makes no sense! Margot said that?"

"Not Margot," said Price, poking his head in from reception. "The brother. You know, the--" he briefly spun both index fingers and both eyes in unrelated directions.

Will looked at Beverly, who shrugged. “Apparently Carlos was his favorite. Also apparently, he has budget veto.”

“Just keep Mason Verger away from me,” said Will. “We’ll all be happier.”

“Damn right. Leave that guano bed to Alana. You just focus on your--” Beverly dropped an envelope in front of Will-- “heavy metal content analysis of the Du Maurier pond water.” She raised an eyebrow.

“Swans are sensitive to lead,” Will said.

“Yeah, they are. It kills them. Doesn’t turn them into avicidal maniacs. Though I’m sure Bedelia appreciates your concern for Hannibal’s well-being.”

“Uh,” Price said, poking his head back in the room. He held up the wireless handset. “Speaking of which? There’s been an incident.”

Incident had been Bedelia’s word, on the phone, and an ironic understatement. The term Will would have used was *carnage*.

“Jesus,” he said. Alana looked like she was holding back tears.

“He must have attacked Hannibal,” she said.

“Well,” Beverly said, squatting down amid the churn of mud and bloody feathers, “it looks like Hannibal gave better than he got.”

The dead cob was the largest mute any of them had seen. Other than that, it was unidentifiable: its head and neck were a mess of red. The feet had been pecked, and both wings hung limp and broken.

It looked like a Swan Ripper scene. That unvoiced observation and eight quarters would buy Will a cup of coffee: there were only so many ways an enraged swan could go about mortal combat. And it didn’t take a forensic wildlife specialist to reconstruct *this* crime. Unlike the previous Ripper maulings, broken black feathers were ostentatiously mixed in with the white.

“No tags,” Beverly said. “Not a Verger bird, at least.”

“A migrant,” Alana said. “Could... he have been the Swan Ripper?”

“It’s a thought,” said Beverly. “Here’s another: we’ll swab all the bodies we have, run DNA, and send the bill to Mason. The Ripper must’ve left *something*. ”

From some distance away, Jack’s roar floated to them, across the water.

“Put your fucking back in it, Zeller! Get it together!”

Hissing and furious splashing. More yelling.

“I think you should put your waders on,” Beverly said to Will, with the satisfaction of someone who already had a job to do.

There was something obviously wrong with Hannibal’s wing. It dragged, half-open, and made him lopsided in the water. But he did not want to be caught, and had been leading Jack, Price, and Zeller a merry chase for twenty minutes. Zeller was clutching his side and wincing.

The pond was not that big.

“You should go coax him,” Bedelia said. She had magicked a deck chair from somewhere and sat under the willow, glass of rosé in hand. Will stared at her.

“Coax him? Hannibal?”

Bedelia smiled at him, conveying both practiced social charm and fondness for Will despite his lack of mental wattage. “Hannibal trusts you,” she said.

Will shook his head, and got in the water.

The situation was at an impasse: the other three had managed to pen Hannibal in a corner of the pond, and he was holding them off with neck lowered and extended, swaying angrily like a king cobra readying to bite. To Will he looked exhausted, feathers in disarray, the tip of his dragging wing trembling.

“Hey!” he said. “Hey.” Hannibal’s head snapped-to, and he stared at Will. Will saw Zeller start forward in the corner of his eye, then think better of it.

“Come on,” he said. “Come on, you stupid asshole bird. I’m trying to help you, okay? We’re all trying to help you. Not going to hurt you. Just going to get that looked at.”

It was more tone of voice and body language than content, of course, though Hannibal kept one red eye fixed on Will’s face and seemed to give the words serious consideration. He relaxed, incrementally, and Will waded closer.

The last lunge was tricky. One had to grab the swan by the neck, then immobilize the wings and lift. Will had no real leverage in the water, and was leery of doing further damage. But Hannibal only flapped in alarm for a second -- clipping Will in the collarbone with his good wing: it felt like being punched -- before abruptly falling limp, as if resigned to inevitable defeat.

He was thirty pounds if he was an ounce. Will staggered and tried to keep his balance.

"A little help here," he grunted. Price scrambled up, got hold of Hannibal's back end and trussed his feet, not without visible satisfaction.

"Let's get him onto the bank," he said. "We'll wrap the wing before we move him." Hannibal only made a sighing noise and sagged further, draping his neck around Will's like an overstuffed feather boa. He was surprisingly warm, but smelled like mud.

He was chasing the stranger through the forest, and it was dark.

"Stop!" Will called. "Come back!" The stranger only cast a fleeting glance back over his shoulder, and Will saw terror in his eyes. He could hear his own pack baying as they paced him, unseen, to either side and behind: leaping over fallen logs, crashing through undergrowth.

It sounded like a hunt, anyone would think so. It was a hunt.

There was something wrong with the stranger's arm. He kept it tucked against his side, and stumbled as he ran. Still, he was putting distance between them: fifty feet turned into a hundred, until he was only a pale gleam slipping in and out of the trees.

"Stop," Will said, desperately, out of breath. "Hannibal, stop!"

The stranger looked back again at that, startled -- then fell suddenly out of sight. Will's dogs bounded forward, and he whistled them back.

"Stay! All of you!"

In reality not all of them would have stayed, under such direct provocation, but in this place they fell back obediently, and allowed Will to approach alone.

The stranger-that-was-somehow-Hannibal had tumbled into a hollow dip in the ground: deep and overgrown enough to constitute a trap. He was huddled into himself at the bottom, the hunch of his shoulders telegraphing resignation. Will squatted down next to the edge and carefully extended his hand.

"Hey," he said, "it's okay. Sorry about the dogs, they won't hurt you. You don't have to run."

Hannibal looked up at him, blinking slowly. Those odd, familiar eyes, traduced into human form.

"Will," he said. "Will... is that you?"

Mason Verger wanted the dead swans.

"I don't understand," said Zeller. Alana smiled thinly.

"Only the recent ones," she said. "Those still in good shape."

"For a relative definition of good shape," said Beverly. "I mean, Carlos belonged to him anyway, but the migrant could be diseased for all we know. Those tests aren't back yet."

"Between you and me," Alana said, "I'm not too fussed if Mason catches a nematode."

"You think he's going to *eat* them?" said Zeller.

"It's that or stuff them," said Price. "Swan *is* a delicacy reserved for royalty. In fact, in medieval Europe they used to do both at once -- skin the bird before roasting, then redress it in its own skin and feathers for table service." He made a zipper-pulling gesture.

"That sounds..." Zeller struggled visibly. "Unhygienic."

"I'll be with the birds," Will said, and escaped.

Not that they were any more peaceful: he could hear Matthew the red-tailed hawk shrieking as he approached the weathering yard. Will stopped and looked him over, but nothing seemed obviously at issue.

"I know you've been fed," he said. "What's stressing you out?" Matthew only tilted his head at Will and gurgled.

Hannibal had been placed indoors, in a straw-bottomed stall for recovering waterfowl, the open side of which had been converted to a plexiglass wall and gate. It was airy enough, and there was plenty of light from the windows running along the upper story of the converted barn. Nevertheless, Hannibal had deliberately nested down in a shadowy corner, neck folded back over his good wing in a lopsided s-squiggle. He looked like a discontented black feather bolster.

"Hey," Will said, and immediately felt ridiculous. In the light of day the dream and its immense emotional weight seemed disproportionate, not to say nonsensical. Did he really picture Hannibal-the-killer-swan as a human being?

In the dream he'd been so *relieved*, to be acknowledged.

Hannibal's neck unfolded to its upright position, slowly and deliberately. He turned his head toward Will like a periscope.

“He’s a drama queen, isn’t he?” said Alana, coming up behind Will. “We had him in one of the outside runs this morning, but Matthew didn’t like that at all -- and he didn’t like Matthew, either.”

“Matthew’s still pretty ruffled,” said Will. “Isn’t Chilton supposed to make an appearance this afternoon?”

“Are you suggesting we let nature take its course?”

“I’m *suggesting* that one of our board members has a death wish. I’ve never seen someone so into raptors and so freaked out by them at the same time.”

“Frederick isn’t into raptors,” said Alana. “He’s into an image of himself. I think he watched *Ladyhawke* once too often as a child.”

“Is that your professional diagnosis?”

Alana smirked.

Hannibal stood and approached the plexiglass. He strained his neck, looking upward at Will’s face. Will crouched down, keeping back from the airholes; he wasn’t sure that Hannibal couldn’t get his beak through those. Hannibal immediately periscoped back, adjusting so as to keep Will at eye level.

“You’re in the clear,” Will told him, drily. “So don’t worry: you’ll be out on Bedelia’s pond and wrecking mayhem again in no time.” He shifted his weight, making to stand, and Hannibal shifted with him, spreading his good wing slightly to stay balanced.

Will frowned, and shifted the other way. Hannibal followed.

He turned his head to the side, and Hannibal did that too.

At length he extended his arms and made a “flying” gesture. Hannibal mirrored the action with his good wing.

Alana had gotten her phone out and was laughing. “Keep doing it,” she said. “Do it for the Vine! Seriously, the kids’ll love it.”

“No,” said Will. “What’s that about?”

“I don’t know? They only do that during courtship.” Alana mimed the neck-curves of mated swans with her arms. “Maybe he wants to make a heart with you.”

“I doubt it,” said Will. But he glanced back as Alana and he left the barn, and saw that Hannibal was still gazing forlornly after them.

Chapter 2

He floated on the water.

The current carried him, slowly but steadily, under low-hanging branches and around the occasional jutting, cragged root. The stream was cold, deep enough that no sand churned under his feet, but the chill was pleasant. It was early yet: a pale mist rose from the water's surface, seeming to part for him and close again in his wake.

At length the stream broadened and opened, into a half-moon shaped pool: placid enough to mirror the sky, edged by rolling, forested hills. It felt like swimming through the air.

Will looked up, and saw that the pool curved around the base of a rocky outcrop, almost like a natural moat. And sure enough, a fairytale castle brooded on the flat peak, its tower jutting grey above the black-green crowns of trees.

There were other waterbirds here. A family of teals broke through the corner of Will's vision, swam by, and disappeared again into a stand of reeds. He heard the whinnying call of a grebe, somewhere in the distance: weet-weet-weet.

(Other waterbirds...?)

Will looked around him, suddenly uncertain. Something nagged at him -- not quite right -- but he couldn't pinpoint it.

He wished Hannibal was here.

He felt a lapping disturbance in the water, then, and Hannibal emerged from the eddying mist as if Will missing him had called him into existence, by Will's side. Will went to him with relief, the wrongness forgotten.

Hannibal's red eyes sparkled to see Will. He swam in a tightening circle, drew up beside Will, and preened. Will let himself drift close so they could touch beaks. Then, feeling emboldened, he laid his neck alongside Hannibal's.

He felt warm, and solid.

Where were you? Will thought, then: it doesn't matter. You're here now.

They set off together across the water, leaving a twin, rippling wake.

Alana was crying.

Will stopped short, halfway across the barn floor, but of course she'd already noticed him coming. "Um," he said, "are you all right? Is there--"

"No," Alana said, rapidly, and made to wipe her eyes on her sleeve before thinking better of it and rummaging in her purse. "No, you don't need -- I'm fine."

She dabbed at her face with a Kleenex. Will averted his gaze and focussed on unloading his 5-litre Tupperware of shredded lettuce into Hannibal's feeding tray. Hannibal, who had been watching the proceedings with interest, side-eyed the lettuce and gave Will a skeptical look.

"It's hospital food," Will told him. "We have a budget, so get used to it."

They stood side by side and watched Hannibal pick through the wilting greens.

"I won't leave first," Will said, finally, "in case you're wondering. I'll just avoid eye contact and maintain an awkward silence until you tell me what's wrong."

That made Alana smile a little. She turned the crumpled Kleenex between her fingers. "I'm dating Margot."

"Uh," Will said, and decided not to lead with *I wasn't aware you were keeping it low key*. "Do I need to give Margot Verger the talk?"

"No! God, no, not that. It's great. She's great." Alana exhaled. "It's Mason. Or actually it's the whole situation right now... Margot's going to fight him for control of the company."

"About time," Will said. Then stopped to think it through, but it seemed clear cut. "I mean that," he added. "But now you're involved and the gloves have come off, I'm guessing."

"I can take care of myself," Alana said. "I mean, it's a lot, but. I don't give a damn what Mason thinks and he can't do anything to me. The problem is the Foundation pledge. Margot can't fight him on both fronts at once."

"And Mason's going to be a petty bitch about it," Will said, "because he knows it's your charity. Yours and Margot's."

"And because I blew up at him," said Alana.

"And," Will said, "because you blew up at him. Okay."

"It's my fault," Alana said. "I should have recused myself as soon as we started dating. I knew it was serious. But then Bella had to take leave and I couldn't put all the donor outreach on Jack, and--" She squeezed the Kleenex into a ball.

"Hey," Will said, "hey, no. None of this is your fault. *Mason* isn't your fault. He's already holding the money over our heads, you think Jack won't say good riddance to that? It'll be tough, but when has our annual budget ever survived contact with reality, anyway?"

"Your optimism's catching," Alana said.

“Day job in law enforcement,” Will said. “Look, we’ll raise the money. I promise. We’ll, uh, we’ll do that bachelor auction thing Beverly keeps talking about.”

“You hate that idea,” Alana said, but her grip had gradually relaxed.

Hannibal observed them, tilting his head this way and that, then quite deliberately overturned his food tray.

Will drifted, naked and sprawled face down, in an all-encompassing, inky, fluffy-soft darkness.

There was something incongruous about the thought, but he was too comfortable to pursue it. He might have been in bed, if beds existed in heaven. Will normally slept on a folding-frame mattress that sagged in the centre and was half dust mites by weight, which -- still under the sticker shock of a new mortgage -- he hadn’t been able to justify replacing when he moved from his last shitty apartment into his Wolf Trap farm house. Afterward it had seemed pointless. He was used to it and there was no one else in his life to complain.

This was to that as feather down was to crumbling rubber foam.

Oh -- feathers.

That’s what this is.

Fluffy feathers, silky and yielding to the touch, but with an underlying firmness: a pleasing solidity. And warmth -- warmer than Will, who ran hot when he slept. He even fancied he could feel a heartbeat.

Will dug his fingers in. He burrowed his face into the soft stuff and wiggled lazily. It felt good, so he did it some more.

A blissful, indeterminate amount of time passed.

Eventually Will realized that he was rocking his hips into the pleasurable sensation. Not getting himself off -- not quite yet -- but beginning to chase an undeniable arousal.

There was a corresponding shape to the feathered darkness, now. Larger than Will, nestled against the full length of his body and wrapped around his throat, as if his incipient desire had called it into existence. Will parted his thighs for it with bemused acceptance, gathered it up in his arms and hugged it close. There was something familiar about the presence, like sense memory. It didn’t feel human, but it was...

It was...

He rolled over onto his back, and --oh-- there was weight, too, pressing him down. Just enough, just right, like a lover. He arched his hips up against it, sighing.

"Where am I?" he said aloud.

"Inside a memory," Hannibal said, close to his ear. He had an accent, not easily placeable, but it set off a low thrum of recognition in Will; thought and feeling began to fall into place. "Or the interpretation of a memory."

"I'm dreaming," Will translated. He realized for the first time that his eyes were closed, and opened them.

It was still dark, but not entirely so. A low illumination flickered, warm and full of shadows like firelight. Hannibal loomed over him, propped up on his elbows, close enough that Will could feel his breath stir. Will's arms were wrapped around his neck. Their bodies fitted together, lower, skin against skin.

Hannibal still had his wings. Or at least Will assumed that's what they were. They curved from somewhere behind him and over Will, like a canopy or cocoon, enclosing the two of them entirely.

The light, such as it was, shone through rather than between the living pinions, and cast everything in blood-glow.

"There you are," Will said, non-sensically. He moved his hand to brush against Hannibal's cheek, his ear, the strands of silver-blond hair. "Why do I dream you up like this?"

"You recognized me," Hannibal said. His eyes were liquid and dark. "You named me, in this form. You remember me, and I you."

"That can't be right," Will said, "you were a bird when Alana introduced us." He laughed a little. "I was a bird too, once. Wasn't I? I remember that from somewhere. There was a castle."

"That was a long time ago," said Hannibal.

"You were there with me," Will said.

Hannibal kissed him, lingering but chaste, on the corner of his mouth. It felt like a tease, and Will turned into it, chasing the contact with his own lips and tongue. Hannibal made a sound, at that -- a soft ah of surprised want -- that sparked an answering lust in Will's belly. He pulled Hannibal closer with intent, hooking his ankles around the back of muscular thighs and rolling his hips again, nudging his erection up to meet--

Oh--

Will's eyes had slid closed. He dug his fingers into the base of unseen wings.

"I like this," he whispered. "Stay like this, with me."

“As long as you want,” Hannibal said. “As long as you want, now that I’ve found you.”

“I actually have a neurology check-up,” Will said. “Tomorrow.”

“You should go to that,” said Beverly.

“That’s... the idea, yes.”

“I mean, you say there’s no headache or fever, and your pupils are the same size and all that, but if something changes--”

“I’m fine,” Will said, retreating, “I have to go feed the birds.” Beverly let the fridge room door swing closed between them, but her face was less than convinced.

Will was aware he looked like shit, but not because he hadn’t slept well. As far as he was concerned, he’d slept *too* well.

During his months of miserable, undiagnosed encephalitis, he’d gotten very used to waking up at 4am to change his sheets, but usually the bedding had been soaked with sweat, not... other body fluids. Will had seen the like once or twice when out on loan to the New Orleans vice squad, but this was *his* bed, dinky and pathetic though it might be, and he’d gone to it incontrovertibly alone.

He wouldn’t even have thought he could *produce* that much.

The worst of it was that he remembered everything. He remembered how it had *felt*. Will always remembered his dreams, which had made forensic investigation and encephalitis equally barrels of fun.

4am to 6am had been spent sitting on a layer of towels over his mattress, and Googling. Will had discovered that up to 25% of black swans -- *C. atratus*, that is -- were homosexual, and a quirk of evolution had endowed them with penises, like other waterfowl but unlike most birds.

The videos had been alarming. He hadn’t... looked, exactly, everything had gone rapturously blurry after a while, but that part had felt human. It had definitely not felt like what he imagined *that* would feel like.

Will had glared at the hundreds of Google Image results for Leda, disporting with *her* swan. It was all elegant heterosexual nude frolics, artfully posed, even when the do was incontrovertibly being done. Leda’s swan was white, and never seemed to have an alternate human form. In the cold light of dawn, Will had decided he was not developing a bird fetish.

Or, God forbid, a sexual fixation on Hannibal, the actual real life (suspected) killer swan.

No, what he wanted was...

Was...

Stay like this, with me.

Maybe Will's subconscious was telling him to get a new mattress.

Maybe Will's subconscious was reminding him that there was no one else to care whether he had a new mattress, or notice that he was feverish and sleepwalking for weeks on end, right up until he collapsed dramatically in a Quantico classroom. Maybe that wasn't all right, when you looked at it objectively, but it was Will's life.

Maybe his subconscious had created a *someone* for him, out of sense memory and daily worries and REM activity. The last living being that had hugged him was a swan, so maybe that was the best his subconscious could do.

It was all nonsense, though. It was a dream.

Hannibal was already at the plexiglass, watching, as Will approached.

He always looked at Will.

Will hesitated. After a moment he set down the feed bucket -- cracked corn, pellets, and more lettuce -- and approached the barrier. Hannibal fluffed up a little, at that, but remained otherwise attentively still.

"I brought you something," Will said, and took an apple out of his pocket. *That* perked Hannibal's head up. "You still have to eat your regular food, but, um, between the two of us."

He cut a slice with his pocket knife, making sure to avoid pips, and slid it through one of the beak-level air holes.

Hannibal darted forward, took the piece of fruit delicately, and made short work of it. Then he shook his plumage out and gave Will an expectant look. It was analogous enough to how Will's dogs gazed upon him at dinner time that Will had to repress the urge to reach over the gate in order to scratch Hannibal's head. One didn't touch wild birds like that.

Mostly.

He cut another slice of apple and gave it to Hannibal.

The DNA tests had come back inconclusive, but it had not escaped Will that there had been no Swan Ripper kills since Hannibal had been incarcerated in Rescue & Rehab's barn. He

was no longer sure what to do about it.

Hannibal's wing was improving daily, and they didn't have the resources to keep him forever. At best, if Will bypassed the rest of the team and convinced Bedelia, Hannibal could be pinioned or relocated. But if Mason got wind of that, he would make demands. He had money, lawyers, and vast reserves of petty malice.

It was all very well to give him dead birds; Will would never send Mason Verger a live, wild swan, for eating or skinning or worse.

"No point asking you to keep out of trouble," he said to Hannibal. Hannibal cocked his head at him, then extended his neck for more apple.

Chapter 3

"You fear there may be extra-legal repercussions," Bedelia said.

"I just..." Will sighed. "I think it would be better if Hannibal were out of our bailiwick. If no more of his swans die, Mason'll assume the migrant was the original culprit. You don't want to have to deal with this guy, trust me."

"Until the Swan Ripper resurfaces somewhere else," Bedelia murmured. She got up and moved to the kitchen, and Will followed after a moment's hesitation. "Wine?"

"I'm driving, but thanks," Will said, glancing around. Plastic sheeting had appeared over all the furniture, and the houseplants and appliances were gone from the counters. "Sorry to pry, but are you—"

"I'm leaving town, yes," Bedelia said. "Indefinitely."

Will frowned. "What about Hannibal?"

"I've already made arrangements for Hannibal."

"Wait, what? I thought we were returning him here on Saturday."

Bedelia gave him an indecipherable look, and refilled her own glass. It was still rosé, but a more intense pink, almost fuchsia.

"A psychological avenue of inquiry, Will," she said. "Suppose you're walking down the street, and you see a wounded bird in the grass. What's your first thought?" There was a pause.

"Is this a trick question?" said Will.

"Not in the least," said Bedelia.

"O-kay," said Will. "It's helpless. I want to save it."

Bedelia gave a slow, thoughtful nod. "And you wouldn't relate very well if someone told you *their* first instinct was to put it out of its misery, regardless of what they do in reality."

"I can imagine that viewpoint," Will said. "I don't particularly want to."

"And certainly not if someone were to toy with the bird or torture it, like the dramatic picture you've painted of Mason Verger."

"Mason Verger should be—"

"I believe you, Will." Bedelia took a sip of wine. "Fortunately, though there are many Masons in the world, there are also concerned animal lovers such as yourself. You'd love to see

Mason put away, but it doesn't matter to you if the animal is particularly horrible. You'd want to save it all the same."

"Bedelia," Will said, "there's no equivalency there. One's an animal, the other's a human being. I'm not even sure why we're speaking hypothetically. We can't let Hannibal continue attacking other birds, but that's not a moral judgment on my part. Stopping him *is* saving him."

"It's lucky that Hannibal isn't human, then," said Bedelia. "Perhaps Mason should have been born a swan as well: that would have spared us considerable trouble."

Will turned up on Saturday to find Jack and Price parlaying outside the barn with a brisk, lawyerly type in an expensive suit.

"Will," Jack said, and waved him over. "This is Leonard Brauer, Dr. Du Maurier's attorney. Mr. Brauer – Will Graham, our volunteer forensic wildlife specialist."

Brauer extended a hand. "You arrest the birds when they misbehave," he said. "Sorry, that was probably your joke. Should we get a move on?"

The question was directed at Jack, so Will looked to Jack as well. "Is this about Hannibal?"

"Let me walk you through the last fifteen minutes," Jack said. "It seems Hannibal's not a wild swan. Dr. Du Maurier has tracked down the swannery from which he was originally purchased by her late husband."

"It *is* in Lithuania," Price interjected.

Will looked at Price, then at Brauer, who shrugged.

"He's certified," he said. "Got all sorts of papers attesting to his purebred status. A certain Count Lecter the Third – so I'm told – started breeding black swans in the sixteen-hundreds, and the Soviets kept it up. Old legend, family crest, the kit and caboodle. Anyway, the point is, there's not many of the swans left, and they're worth a lot of money. Dr. Du Maurier had me contact the—" he looked at his phone— "Aukstaitija National Waterbird Preserve – and they're happy to take the bird. Dr. Satoh flew here so she could oversee the process and accompany him back."

He indicated the open door of the barn.

There was a clatter. Someone cursed in a loud, male voice; not in English.

Will glared at Jack, and headed inside.

Two burly men in heavy-duty leather aprons and gloves were attempting to coax Hannibal out of his stall. Hannibal, needless to say, was having none of it, fending them off with extended neck and jabs of his beak. He didn't seem hurt, only indignant: if anything the men were moving over-cautiously.

A large travel crate stood to the side, guarded by a slim Asian woman of Will's age in a long, hunter-green coat. She looked at Will dourly.

"Are you Will Graham?" she said.

"Are *you* Dr. Satoh?" Will said. "What the hell – are you trying to crate him up and fly him to Europe right this *minute*? We have no idea who you are."

"Well, you've just been brought into the loop, Mr. Graham," said Brauer, who had followed him into the barn. "No offense, but Dr. Du Maurier and I have a very good idea who these people are."

"I have to say this is very sudden," said Jack. "The paperwork does seem in order, but our intent was always to return the swan to Dr. Du Maurier's grounds after his rehabilitation."

"Dr. Du Maurier is travelling outside the country," said Brauer. "Hence you have myself, my per diem, and my power of attorney." He smiled thinly and made an it-is-what-it-is-you-assholes gesture.

"We will take very good care of him," said Dr. Satoh, in a mildly disapproving tone. She had a light accent that did not sound at all Eastern European. "We will keep him under observation for a few days at a facility associated with the Baltimore Zoo, and ensure he is free from infectious disease and parasites. I understand that this is a non-profit organization: we do not want to impose further on your resources for this transaction between private parties."

"I don't think you should worry about that," said Jack. "We want what's best for the bird."

Dr. Satoh considered this for a beat. Then she looked at Will.

"What is best for Hannibal," she said, "would be for him to return to his family."

The paperwork was indeed in order. Will read through all of it, out of sheer mulishness, but the Aukstaitija National Waterbird Preserve seemed to be a legitimate organization in every respect. There were even brochures, with picturesque photos that looked oddly familiar: rolling, forested hills, a placid, misty lake. Black swans swam, or dozed on the grassy banks, or were examined in state-of-the-art-looking veterinary facilities.

"Nice work if you can get it," said Price, craning over Will's shoulder. "How much do you think one of these status symbols cost?"

"They are priceless," Dr. Satoh said. "And, they are very proud – they do not socialize well with regular mute swans. Hannibal should never have been sold alone."

"Really," Will said. "Do they get lonely? It wouldn't cause behavioural problems, by any chance?"

"Will," Jack called. "You're going to need to help these guys."

Will sighed.

Hannibal quieted down as soon as Will entered his stall, and after being fed another sliced apple, even let Will pick him up again without too much fuss. It made Will feel obscurely guilty.

This is exactly what you asked for, he reminded himself. Hannibal out of our bailiwick and beyond Mason's reach. Bedelia had solved the issue more efficaciously and permanently than Will could have envisaged.

"Goodbye, Hannibal," he said, once Hannibal had been crated. "You're going home – back to your family. Who knows, maybe you'll find a mate and have asshole cygnets of your own."

Hannibal only craned his head, trying to look Will in the face, as always. He was still looking when Dr. Satoh's burly minions picked up the crate and loaded it in the back of their van.

The forest was full of shadows. They shifted, breathed, melded into the trees and each other only to move again. An unfelt breeze rattled through the leaves overhead.

Hannibal knelt in the clearing, nude, in a beam of moonlight. His head was bowed, and the light picked out the silver highlights in his hair. His wings trailed behind him like an inky cloak.

"Don't separate us," he said.

The shadows murmured. Bedelia stepped out from under the trees. She wore a flowing dress that fell to her knees, and carried a glass of wine in her hand. Will had the instinct that both dress and wine were red – like blood or cherries – but his eyes couldn't distinguish the colour: in the moonlight it all looked black.

"Oh, Hannibal," she sighed. "What are we to do with you?"

"I have found him. Let me stay with him: that was our agreement."

"You will die."

"Then so be it. He died for me, once."

"He chose to be with you." Bedelia said. "Once, yes – but only once. Love itself lasts no longer than the lifespan of a bird on the wing. If that is death, then one might say he chose."

"Yet I've lived many lifetimes since, thinking only of him."

"How romantic," Bedelia said drily. "Your crimes are your own. He could not save you then; why should it be any different now? He barely remembers you. It seems to me you have learned remarkably little from experience."

"You sentenced me to live according to my nature," said Hannibal. "Should I repent of that, when nature is red in tooth and claw? Have I not met the terms of my punishment?"

"I am not the only one you answer to," Bedelia said.

Another sursurrection passed through the trees. Will felt it – felt himself – as part of an unseen crowd, pressing against the edges of the clearing. The ink of Hannibal's wings shivered like a pool, and began to expand, creeping up his throat and along the moonlit grass.

"I propose a trial," said Dr. Satoh. She stepped out from between the trees, and the shadows swirled a moment at her feet before letting her go. She wore a long, slim robe that fell to her feet, all in green – a green so dark it was nearly, but not quite, black.

Bedelia frowned. "Hannibal has had centuries to prove himself."

"Not of Hannibal," said Dr. Satoh. "Of Will Graham. He made a sacrifice, once: that gives him certain claims, if he wishes to assert them. And he is here now."

She turned, and looked directly at Will.

"You can save Hannibal," she said, "if you so desire. Wake up, Will Graham. We haven't got all day."

Will blinked groggily awake, trying to hold onto the dream. Winston had both paws on the pillow and was whining in his ear. When he realized Will was stirring he huffed and licked his face.

It was just light: the fish-belly grey of incipient dawn. The dogs were all up and milling about, their toenails clicking on the floorboards. Will had barely begun to wonder what had gotten them riled when there was a loud series of raps on the window.

He glanced around and nearly fell off the bed. Dr. Satoh stood on the porch, right up against the glass, still in her long coat and disapproving expression. She said something, but it was muffled by the physical obstacle.

Will scrambled to open the front door. Immediately afterward, he remembered that he slept in his underwear.

Dr. Satoh looked him up and down. She was carrying a large duffel bag.

"Do you always sleep in your living room?" she said.

Will did not dignify that with a response. "What are you doing here?"

Dr. Satoh pressed her lips together. "I need your assistance," she said. "Hannibal is in trouble."

Someone, it turned out, had broken into the Baltimore Zoo in the night and stolen Hannibal.

"That's not possible," Will said.

But anything was possible, given effort, time, and money. Especially money.

"It was an inside job," Dr. Satoh said, in the face of Will's sinking gut feeling. "The police is investigating, of course. But Dr. Du Maurier had certain specific concerns when she contacted me – that was part of the reason she wanted Hannibal moved quickly, to a secure location. If she was right, then time is of the essence, and I cannot be sure which of my staff I can trust."

"It's Mason Verger," Will said, shoving his legs into yesterday's trousers. "It's got to be. No one else would be able to suborn someone at the zoo at such short notice. He must've been waiting for us to put Hannibal back in Bedelia's pond, figured he'd be easier to get hold of that way."

"And now he has Hannibal," said Dr. Satoh. "What does he intend?"

"Hell if I know." Will grimaced. "Eat him, probably. Stuff him. Turn him into a wall hanging. Throw him to the pigs – that's what the Vergers do, by the way, they own a meatpacking company, and Mason keeps all sorts of exotic pig breeds at Muskrat Farm. It won't bother him that Hannibal's a rare bird. That just makes it more fun."

"Then it is as I expected," said Dr. Satoh. She unzipped her duffel bag and began to retrieve items: binoculars, gloves, nylon rope, zip ties, wire cutter, and actual, classic, "bank robber" style black knit hoods. "We must take matters into our own hands. We need a plan of attack, and also of exit."

"Jesus," Will said. "Have you done this before?"

"You may call me Chiyoh," she said, unsmiling. "I merely take my responsibility toward my charges seriously. And, I think, so do you."

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“The big barn off to the north side,” Alana said. “That’s where the pigs are. Will, what’s this about?”

“I’m just curious,” Will said.

“Are you? Listen, Will, Margot got an invitation from Mason to dinner, tonight, at the Farm. She turned him down, but it means he’s planning something. I don’t think—”

“I’ve got to go, Alana. Look, forget about it, okay? It’s really nothing.”

“We have to move,” Chiyoh said, popping open the driver’s door.

Muskrat Farm’s grounds were too large to guard in their entirety, and Will had spent enough time traipsing around and stringing up motion sensors on Rescue and Rehab’s behalf to get a sense of the layout. They left Chiyoh’s van hidden in the trees, and went over the fence at the back of Bedelia’s property. A wide detour around the water feature left them behind the large, aluminum siding-clad north barn, crouched and peering.

The angle of approach revealed a low extension running out the back of the barn, like a long, gambrel-roofed shed, opening into a gated, high-fenced yard not far from the north wing of the house. The gate was chained together loosely, and padlocked.

Two small skid-steer loaders were parked in the yard; one with an industrial meat hook on its lifted arm. As far as Will could see, they would be invisible when approaching the Farm from the main driveway.

The north wing culminated in a large chimney stack, like that of an industrial bakery. It was spouting white smoke.

Will pointed, but Chiyoh merely shook her head and made a lip-zipping motion. She crouch-walked until she was backed up against the gate, then poked her head above the fence to check for occupants. After a moment, she retrieved the bolt cutter from her bag and went to work on the chain.

Will joined her, and in no time they had slipped through the gate. Chiyoh went for the barn side first - there were windows - and after a moment she nodded and motioned Will over.

Will stood on his toes and peered in.

Then he looked at Chiyoh in silent outrage. She merely shook her head, grimly.

There were pigs, all right. A couple of dozen of them, all milling together in a straw-bottomed pen. This close to the glass, it was possible to hear their racket, and Will supposed

he was thankful he couldn't smell them. But there were other animals too. Exotics. There was a pair of wallabies, shut up in a too-small cage against the wall, and – a cassowary, it looked like, and—

—Was that a *gibbon*?

It was a gibbon. It met Will's eyes, and bared teeth.

Chiyoh was already prepping a handheld digital camcorder.

"There's no one in there," she said. "Human, that is."

"The kitchen," Will said. Chiyoh nodded.

"You go first," she said. "I'll create a distraction."

The back door to the north wing was unlocked, and someone inside was playing Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*.

Will found himself in an old-fashioned pantry. Half of the cabinets had been converted to humming freezer space, but the rest held all the fine china and silverware that could have been expected, as well as *specialized* kitchen implements. He stared at the array of cleavers and pans and copper jelly molds and empty chocolate fountains and—

"To begin with, the quail," someone in the next room said, quite distinctly.

Will pulled his hood up to cover his face, sidled up to the open door, and peered through.

The first thing he spotted was Hannibal, in a four-by-four-foot cage, suspended from the ceiling by robust-seeming plastic-coated steel pylons. Then the broad, tall man in a white apron and French chef's hat, who faced the cage across a vast marble kitchen island.

He held a serving platter in one hand: it was empty, except for what appeared to be a small, dead bird, lying on its back with its feet pointed ceilingward.

The man's back, luckily, was to the door and Will.

"Now, in the old days," he said, "you'd be starting with a songbird – a lark, or an or-toe-*lann* as the French preferred. Gorged with nuts and seeds, drowned in Armagnac, plucked, and flambéed whole. Exquisite.

"Endangered species, though: hard to get hold of at short notice. Hence the quail. Nevertheless! Mr. Verger desires a certain amount of *oomph* in presentation, so we are not electing for the domesticated *Coturnix*, but *Colinus virginianus* – the grand old bobwhite of

his childhood, and, it must be said, mine. This is a speckled golden Mexican varietal, very striking. You'll be able to see the wing colouring once we have it on its stand."

He paused, and Will scanned the room. There was no other interlocutor: no phone, screen, or intercom. No one responded through the doorway at the far side of the kitchen, which seemed to open out onto a dining room area. As far as he could tell, the man was talking to the swan.

"Not that I've skinned and stuffed the same specimen I'll roast," he was saying. "Showbiz magic, eh? All the taxidermy is done in advance, except for, ah, the piece of resistance. Which would be you."

He made an exaggerated finger gun gesture at Hannibal, who regarded him haughtily.

Hannibal had been trussed for transportation, feet above tail, and wrapped in a flour sack with one corner cut out: so he could extend his neck but not much else. It was a mixed blessing, Will thought.

On the one hand, it would make it easier to get him out of the cage and out of the building – assuming the taxidermist-and-chef could be distracted into leaving.

On the other hand, they would have mere minutes before the man would notice his "piece of resistance" was missing, and sprinting was out of the question. Thirty pounds was a lot of bird to wrangle, even between two people, and it was a long way back to Will's car.

"Part two: pheasant!" the man announced. He set the platter down and crossed the room to the industrial-sized refrigerator. "Now, the *Phasianus* is known to dry out easily when roasted, which is why this brace has been cold-brined as well as hung. You have rosemary in here, bay leaf, juniper berries – very classic flavours..."

Will sidled through the door and into the shadow of a hulking sideboard. Whatever havoc Chiyoh meant to wreak, it would come from the direction of the barn. Will couldn't be in the man's path once his attention was drawn there.

"...Excellent life-like work, if I say so myself, and the tail regalia will prove tremendously decorative in the service. Part three! The duck – the middle layer in your common turducken, one might say. Though in keeping with tonight's theme, domestic is far too drab and won't do..."

Hannibal's neck extended, slowly, to its fullest height. He turned his head to the side, so that one red eye was pointed squarely in Will's direction.

"...Instead we're working with a handsome mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos* – note the distinctive green head. Given the lower fat content of the wild-caught bird, we'll compensate with butter in the orange sauce..."

Will stared back. He lifted his finger, feeling ridiculous, and tapped his lips in the sign for silence.

Hannibal subsided slightly.

“Oh, hang on,” the man said, “it’s ‘*Olim lacus colueram.*’ ‘Once I had dwelt on lakes, once I had been beautiful – when I was a swan.’ I *love* this piece, don’t you?”

He did something with a remote, and the volume of the music crescendoed.

*Girat, regirat garcifer;
Me rogus irit fortiter;
Propinat me nunc dapifer.*

*Miser, miser!
Modo niger
Et ustus fortiter!*

“I,” the man half-shouted, “am going to need a *very large* roasting pan!”

He turned on his heel and bustled through the door to the pantry.

There was a moment of silence, followed by a clipped scream, and a loud crash.

Will sprang into action.

The cage wasn’t padlocked – Hannibal was immobilized, and presumably intended to meet his fate very shortly. Will made quick work of the bolts, threw the cage door open, then hesitated.

Hannibal weaved his head around, and hissed with impatience. For the first time, he appeared to struggle, trying to stand up and flap from inside the flour sack.

The cage was at eye height: Will had no leverage to lift him out, unless he got up on the counter. There was nowhere to hide either: despite the continued crashes and yells and – grunting? – emanating from the pantry, the chef didn’t sound as if he were running away. And Will really didn’t want to carry Hannibal deeper into the house.

“Goddamnit,” he said. “All right, just... behave and you’ll get through this.”

There was a sturdy pair of poultry shears lying out on the counter, by the cleavers, because of course there was. Will ripped through the sack fabric and snipped the ties on Hannibal’s legs. Hannibal stood immediately, shaking off the remnants of his restraints.

“Follow me,” Will said, then *something* grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and bounced his head off the metal cage, hard. His vision exploded in a shower of lights and pain.

Someone was screaming – full-throatedly roaring. Will didn’t think it was him: he was barely aware that he’d fallen in a sidewise heap on the floor, and the noise was coming from somewhere above his current position. In any case, the effort involved seemed prohibitive. The hood hadn’t done much to cushion the blow, and now it was half-obscuring his view. He squinted with vague interest as the chef’s legs went pinwheeling past, half-consumed by a monstrous, enraged entity of shadows and feathers.

Minutes went by.

Then the pigs came.

They flowed pungently into the room via the pantry – a good half dozen in single file, led by an impressively snaggle-toothed boar – and milled about the kitchen, hooves clacking on marble tile. They seemed riled up, but indecisive, now that their previous opponent had disappeared. Chiyoh must have released them from their pen.

Will had to get up, he decided. Anyone who remained horizontal in the current circumstances risked being trampled or eaten. Despite the convincing argument, his muscles failed to respond.

Will began, dimly, to worry.

Hannibal stalked back into his field of vision, between him and the pigs, shaking out his ruffled plumage. He caught sight of the boar, and the boar caught sight of him.

They regarded each other pensively. Even the other pigs stilled and turned their heads.

Eventually, Hannibal drew himself up to his fullest height. He extended his wings horizontally and flapped, once. It created a momentary zephyr, pleasant but for the barnyard effluvia.

The boar dipped its head in wisdom. The swan represented a needless battle, a distraction: he had enemies of longer standing, and they were within scent. He circled around the other side of the kitchen island, toward the door that led to the dining room, and from there the rest of the house.

The other pigs followed. Hannibal stood still, wings extended, and watched them go.

Will's eyes slipped closed.

An indeterminate amount of time passed.

He was woken again by Chiyoh. "You are likely concussed," she said. She didn't ask him to count fingers.

"Right," Will said. There were still crashing sounds, dimly and from further away indoors, and an alarm had begun to blare. It cut like a knife into his eardrums. "Help me get up."

Chiyoh did so, and let him lean on her until they were outside and his legs had picked up the knack again.

The yard was a muddy, churned mess, and Hannibal was nowhere in sight. "Where's—"

"He's flown the coop," she said. "We should too."

Chapter End Notes

'Olim lacus colueram' is the [Song of the Roasted Swan](#), in Carmina Burana.

Just a short epilogue left. :)

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The castle burned, red against the night sky.

Will had dragged Hannibal to the water's edge, but there was nowhere left to go. The flames were spreading, cresting over the hill: the forest was a jagged cage of black branches overhead, limned with infernal light. Smoke thickened the air, cloying.

Will knelt and touched Hannibal's hands, where they held down makeshift dressings over the wound in his side. His fingers came away wet.

"You should go," Hannibal said. There was only the barest strain in his voice, but the words came slowly. "Make your way to the village. They will come for me here: your survival will not matter to them, nor their own, as long as they determine my fate."

"I can't do that," Will said. Shadows moved in his peripheral vision – darkest red, midnight green – but he did not turn to look. "I chose you. Remember?"

Hannibal met his gaze, dark eyes searching Will's, and smiled. He reached up with one hand and traced the slope of Will's cheek. It left a damp trail, and a scent of iron.

"I remember," he said. "Will. I'll always remember."

His eyes slipped closed, and his hand fell away. His breathing stayed steady.

There was no sound, only a gathering sense of presence. Will looked up.

"Please," he said, "save him."

"A peculiar request," said Bedelia. "You know what he is; you know what he did to the others. Do you suggest he is undeserving of punishment? Blood must answer for blood. He set himself above human law, but he is a man."

"No," Will said. "No, I – I understand that. But I have seen his truth. He has the form and mind of a man, but not the nature. Perhaps that's why I chose him. He is wild, and so am I. Let the wild law govern."

"That is one strategy, certainly," Bedelia said. "But what are you grasping at? Form and mind will slough away: the palace of crimes, the cruel subtleties that entrance you so... what is left to save?"

"He'll remember," Will said, "you heard him." He smiled, a bit jagged. "We all get to decide. You agree to your part, I'll agree to mine. Blood still has to answer, right?"

Bedelia said nothing.

“As long as I can stay with him,” Will said.

There were shouts, branches cracking under approaching feet.

He was alone, except for Hannibal, still motionless by his side. He rose to his feet, grasping his knife in one hand. It would have to do.

“I have no idea who these people are,” Will said. “Are you sure they’re donors? We do not have this many donors.”

“You’re going to be fine,” Jack said, in a tone that aimed for reassurance and landed on vague threat. He straightened Will’s tie and poked his glasses further up his nose. “Get out there. Mingle. Raise your selling price.”

The volume in the hall was steadily increasing: the drinks had already been flowing for an hour. Beverly held central court in a sparkly, athletic-looking dress, surrounded by half a dozen prospective suitors. Price had claimed the bar and surroundings for his home base; Zeller was pinned down by a determined-looking redhead in one corner.

Will spotted Alana and Margot standing together, and made a beeline for them with relief. Halfway there he realized they were part of a group, including Frederick Chilton, but by then it was too late: eye contact had been made.

Margot Verger gave him a sympathetic look as he slunk close. “Hello, Will,” she said. “Fancy a drink?”

“God, whiskey, please,” Will said. Margot motioned for a waiter.

“Will,” Alana said cheerfully, “I’d like to introduce you to someone. This is Dr. Hannibal Lecter. Dr. Lecter, Will Graham, our forensic wildlife specialist.”

Will looked up at sharp cheekbones, and familiar red-brown eyes. “Uh,” he said.

Dr. Lecter smiled, and extended a hand. “Enchanted to make your acquaintance,” he said. “Your friends have spoken of you extensively.”

Will reciprocated the handshake, a beat too late. “Then you’ve been warned,” he said. “Sorry, you said your name was—”

“Ah,” Dr. Lecter said. His grip was warm and steady. “Hannibal Lecter the Eighth, I’m afraid. The waterbird preserve was nationalized before my time, but somehow the naming conventions have survived on both sides.”

“It’s quite the coincidence,” Alana said, “isn’t it, Will? I would never have put it together.”

“I was telling Dr. Lecter,” Margot said, “about my brother’s unfortunate legal situation. The PETA videos and all that.” She placed a glass tumbler in Will’s hand, and Will drained the finger of bourbon therein automatically. His stomach was swooping oddly, as if gravity had been suspended inside his torso.

“Everyone’s talking about it,” Chilton said, halfway between gossip-greedy and disgruntled. “It’s the scandal *du jour*.”

“Well,” Margot said, drily, “there’s no misunderstanding that can’t be sorted out in front of a judge. When you think about Mason’s *unwavering* support for Rescue and Rehab... He’ll just have to pay more attention to the people he hires in future, that’s all.”

“Certainly it seems Mr. Verger takes a particular interest in animal welfare,” Dr. Lecter agreed. “I’m good friends with Dr. Satoh, who directs the breeding program at Aukstaitija, and she had much the same impression.” He looked again at Will. “Dr. Bloom has been canvassing her colleagues with considerable enthusiasm, but I confess it was Chiyoh’s story that inspired me to attend the fundraiser. I would very much like to speak with you further about your experience.

“Of course, your time is of value – especially tonight. Nevertheless, I hope to prevail against the competition.”

His voice dipped low and velvety on the last word. Will met his eyes again, startled.

I’ll always remember.

“I’ll, uh, sure,” he said. “Thanks. There’s not going to be any competition.”

Alana gave a stifled cough. Chilton only raised his eyebrows, and his wineglass.

“Well then,” he said, “happy bidding.”

Chapter End Notes

That's the end, folks. Thank you for following this odd little story, and for tagging me in all things Swannibal. XD Til the next one!

End Notes

Inspired by the real-world exploits of [Hannibal the killer swan](#), late of Pembroke Castle, Wales.

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